



ANNA-LISA HALLING¹

Vanderbilt University - anna-lisa.halling@vanderbit.edu

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COUNTERING THE MALE GAZE: FEMINIST ELEMENTS IN MIRA DE AMESCUA'S *LA CASA DEL TAHUR*

Theater is always about the relationship of what is seen and the fact that it is seen, and always renewing the relation of what is seen to the social gaze in which it is inscribed.

Barbara Freedman

Ésta es la primera alabanza de la buena mujer, decir que es dificultosa de hallar. Lo cual, así es alabanza de las buenas, que es aviso para conocer generalmente la flaqueza de todas.

Fray Luis de León

RESUMEN:

En *La casa del tabur*, de Mira de Amescua, se evidencia una objetivación continua de los personajes femeninos en la mirada masculina. Sin embargo, esto no debe leerse como gesto de misoginia por parte del dramaturgo, puesto que él pone en yuxtaposición este intento de objetivizar a la mujer con elementos feministas que se oponen a ella. La mirada de los personajes masculinos es voyerista e interesada, dado que proyecta las expectativas masculinas en los personajes femeninos y espera que acepten esta imposición como si fueran una página en blanco en la cual se puede inscribir el deseo masculino. Aunque los personajes femeninos no pueden evitar esa mirada, sí pueden decidir si la aceptan e

¹ Anna-Lisa Halling is currently working on her dissertation, «Feminine Voice and Space in Early Modern Convent Theater,» which explores plays written by nuns in Spain and Portugal. She has concentrated on early modern Iberian literature, and is particularly interested in feminist theory, spatial theory, and performance criticism. She has presented papers on Spanish Golden Age prose and drama, from María de Zayas's exemplary novels to Sor Juana and Sor Violante do Céu's *villancicos*. She is also interested in theatrical production as a teaching, learning, and outreach tool, and she has participated in several such productions as both an actor and a director.

internalizan, o la rechazan. Así, los elementos misóginos y feministas conviven en esta obra teatral de Mira de Amescua, aspecto que le da a la obra una complejidad más profunda que la que muchos académicos han supuesto.

PALABRAS CLAVE: La mirada masculina, la teoría feminista, Mira de Amescua, *La casa del tabur*, misoginia

ABSTRACT:

Evidence abounds in Mira de Amescua's *La casa del tabur* of an ongoing objectification of the female characters which results from the male gaze. Nevertheless, to accuse the playwright of misogyny is unwarranted, since he juxtaposes this objectification with feminist elements that counter that gaze. The gaze of the male characters is voyeuristic and self-serving, since it projects male expectations onto the female characters, and expects them to accept this imposition as if they were a blank canvas on which to inscribe male desire. Although the female characters cannot avoid being looked at, they can decide whether or not to accept and internalize this gaze. Thus, misogynist and feminist traits exist side by side in Mira de Amescua's play, which is more complex and deserving of study than many scholars previously assumed.

KEY WORDS: Male gaze, feminist theory, Mira de Amescua, *La casa del tabur*, misogyny

By the year 1641, «ya iba olvidándose tanto el nombre como el renombre del excelso poeta» Mira de Amescua (V. Williamsen 13). His *comedia* titled *La casa del tabur* was most likely first performed in 1621 (V. Williamsen 9), twenty years before his rising star began to dim. This particular play is not one of the more celebrated texts of the author's canon, and, at first glance, it certainly does not seem to stand out from most Golden Age dramatic works. This is perhaps due to an unfortunate and almost systematic neglect of his oeuvre. In point of fact, Vern Williamsen insists that Mira de Amescua «seguía desconocido o calificado como dramaturgo de tercer orden hasta los años más recientes» (19). In turn, James A. Castañeda notes that «following a lifetime in which he was held in high esteem by his contemporaries, Mira de Amescua has been the victim of centuries of neglect» (170). Notwithstanding the general disregard of the playwright's texts, this particular work is a literary treasure, which deserves the attention of the theatre scholars and practitioners. No previous studies of *La casa del tabur* have employed feminist theory or psychoanalysis as a critical approximation to the work. I argue that while evidence abounds in this play of an ongoing objectification of the female characters, resulting from the male gaze, the playwright juxtaposes this objectification with feminist elements that counter that gaze.

The idea of the gaze was first introduced by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and later applied to cinema by Laura Mulvey in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, and

then to the stage by Barbara Freedman in *Staging the Gaze: Postmodernism, Psychoanalysis, and Shakespearean Comedy*. Lacan's concept of the male gaze serves as a springboard for Mulvey's analysis of cinematography, as she considers his ideas through a feminist lens. She asserts that «the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly» (19). Freedman, in contrast, focuses on theatre, specifically plays by Shakespeare. She argues that the object of the gaze «is aware that she is seen, reflects that awareness, and so deflects our look» (1). In Mira de Amescua's *comedia*, this male gaze plays a central role in the narrative and shapes the interactions between the men and the women in the play. At first, it might seem that the playwright employs this gaze to consistently subjugate the female characters, but I argue that this supposition is faulty and does not take into consideration certain feminist elements of the text.

Perhaps most scholars have routinely overlooked Mira de Amescua's work due to the fact that some critics have labeled him an early modern misogynist, despite their praise for his literary brilliance. For example, José Bella insists that «[e]l anti-feminismo o la misoginía, rasgo típicamente medieval, es en pocos autores tan rotundo y sincero como en Mira» (qtd. in A. Williamsen 316). Other critics differ greatly from this view. Juan Manuel Villanueva, for one, believes that «las comedias amescuanas... encierran un mensaje profundo centrado en los derechos de la mujer; lo que demuestra la originalidad y la modernidad de nuestro dramaturgo» (379). Amy Williamsen agrees, and states that «clearly the accusation of misogyny does not reflect careful consideration of Mira's texts; nor does it consider the contribution of the strong female leads that dominate the stage in several of his *comedias*. Any conclusion pertaining to Mira's stance vis-à-vis women cannot rely on arbitrarily selected excerpts» (316). This essay is not meant to prove or to disprove the misogyny of the author, especially since it deals only with one of his many plays. Nevertheless, I contend that to accuse the playwright of treating his female characters unfairly is unwarranted, especially given the historical context in which he was writing.

I would argue that Alejandro's gambling addiction relates to the way in which he and several other characters treat the female characters. Women are considered as objects of certain value, just like the goods that Alejandro and other male characters in the play employ to woo, to impress, and to make bets. Roque indicates the equivalence of betting and courting in the very beginning of the play when he tells Isabela that her husband and his friends are either aiming «a los juegos o a las damas» (346), or «a jugar y a matar damas» (27). He does not seem to differentiate between the two. Women are also held to the impossible ideal reflected in the medieval dichotomy of «la buena mujer», as opposed to «la mala mujer». It is the male gaze that objectifies Isabela and Ángela

both as commodities and as representations of the ideal woman. Despite this objectification, the women in the play wield a certain degree of power, as they employ language to establish their subjectivity and exercise agency.

In the first act of *La casa del tabur*, Alejandro's father marries him to the patient and uncomplaining Isabela in the hope of curing his gambling and philandering addictions. Although he initially seems reformed by his marriage, Alejandro falls into his old vices, as his good intentions quickly dissipate, and he even resorts to stealing his wife's jewels and using the estate his father gave him to fuel his compulsions. Alejandro and his fellow gamblers meet in a house occupied by Ángela and her mother, and the matriarch pretends to be deaf in order to lure the gamblers into a false sense of security, believing they can woo her beautiful daughter without parental supervision. Thus Ángela's mother can watch over her daughter and protect her honor. Although her mother persuades her to flirt with each of the gamblers in the hopes of bolstering their meager family fortune, Ángela only has eyes for Carlos. Unfortunately, Alejandro becomes enamored of Ángela's beauty, while Carlos proceeds to fall for Isabela. As a result of this shift of affection, Alejandro begins to give his new love interest gifts that he has stolen from his wife, Isabela, although his servant, Roque, foils his plans by returning the ill-gotten goods to the long-suffering spouse.

In the second act, Alejandro's irresponsibility begins to weigh heavily on his wife, especially since his gambling threatens to bring about their financial ruin. A desperate Isabela is then compelled to turn to her father-in-law for help. Roque continues his ingenious trickery by forging letters to Alejandro from Ángela in the hope of dissuading him from returning to her house and his wicked ways. Alejandro's behavior deeply concerns his father, Marcelo, who offers himself in marriage to Ángela's mother on the condition that she no longer allow gamblers, including his wayward son, in her house. Marcelo hopes to cure Alejandro of his addiction by restricting his access to the gambling house. In an effort to comply with her mother's side of the bargain, Ángela attempts to kick each of her suitors out. Their desire for her, however, overrides her attempts to restore order to her house, and a string of hilarious misunderstandings follows. Alejandro returns to his house and spies two men loitering outside. The first is Carlos, who has succumbed to the temptation of Isabela's great beauty, and the second is Marcelo, who intends to make his son jealous by appearing as an unknown suitor seeking Isabela's attention. Alejandro worries that his honor may not be intact, and so he asks his father to keep an eye on Isabela and renounces his former vices.

In the final act, more misunderstandings and overheard conversations lead Carlos to believe that Ángela has been unfaithful to him only moments after the two declare their intention to marry one another. Marcelo sees his son leaving

Ángela's house and enters to remind her mother of their agreement. Believing her to be quite deaf, he and Roque mock her mercilessly. Nevertheless, since her deafness is merely a ruse that she employs to lull her daughter's suitors into a false sense of security, she overhears their conversation and realizes that Marcelo has no intention of marrying her. The mother subsequently formulates her own plan to fool him, and offers him her daughter in her place, to which he readily agrees due to Ángela's beauty and youth. The mother's name is also Ángela, so when he writes the name of his bride in preparation for their secret wedding, he actually betroths himself to the mother rather than to the daughter. To complete the deception, daughter and mother switch clothes, and the wedding goes off without a hitch. Once the ploy has been revealed, Carlos is relieved that his betrothed has not married Marcelo, and Marcelo, in turn, happily accepts his new wife.

To understand the significance of the male gaze in this *comedia*, it is imperative to turn to Laura Mulvey's commentary. The concept of the male gaze often focuses on the voyeurism promoted by the camera, which is used not only to film the action, but also to direct and inform the gaze of the public as well. Although Mulvey dedicates her studies to the cinematic, much of her theory is applicable to theatre as well. Oftentimes in theatre, as in the cinema, «the image of woman says little or nothing about women's reality, but is symptomatic of male fantasy» (Mulvey xiii). This male fantasy creates and defines the female characters in this *comedia*. This fantasy is revealed through looking, and Mulvey identifies the pleasure derived from looking at an object as «scopophilia» (16), which has two manifestations. The first derives satisfaction from utilizing another person as sexual stimulation, and is linked with voyeurism, like that of Carlos, who realizes that his love for Isabela will never come to fruition, so he will settle for looking at the bars on her window. When her husband discovers this transgression, he points out that Carlos is not merely looking, but rather intently staring at the balcony of Alejandro's house. In other words, Carlos replaces the possibility of physical pleasure with that of visual pleasure. Marcelo, in speaking of his willingness to marry the young Ángela, declares, «Ya la he visto y me ha agradado» (66), thereby indicating his own participation in the same voyeuristic scopophilia he decries in others.

In conjunction with the first expression of scopophilia, which comes from pleasure received when «using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight» (Mulvey 18), the second manifestation of voyeuristic looking is narcissistic, helps constitute the ego, and results from the subject identifying him or herself with the object that he or she looks at. This identification with that seen relates to Lacan's mirror stage in that «curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human

body, the relationship between the human form and its surroundings, the visible presence of the person in the world» (Mulvey 17). In Lacan's theory, the child is fascinated with his or her own reflection in the mirror, but at the same time identifies it as an 'other.' Barbara Freedman notes that identification often leads to misidentification, which belies «the distance between subject and its ideal image, termed *ideal* because it can never be fully assimilated» (53). The identification with the object in question is also manifest in *La casa del tabur*, but the outcome and purpose of the gaze can change based on the genders of the object and the subject.

When a male does the looking and the object in question is a female, then «the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly» (Mulvey 19). In other words, the male sees only what he wants to see, and the female subject of the gaze subsequently becomes what he wants her to be. This projection indicates a complete loss of identity for the women being objectified. As Budd Boetticher astutely notes, «[W]hat counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance» (qtd. in Mulvey 19). All characterization of women by men in *La casa del tabur* must ignore to some degree the humanity of the objectified women, since it is much easier and comforting to reduce them to flat stereotypes, such as the domestic angel. Mulvey blames the anxiety that drives this characterization on classic Freudian concerns about castration and the law of the father. The man must objectify the woman in order to assuage his own terror, which is induced by the possibility of castration.

Although the gaze has obvious and strong connections with vision, one of the most apparent projections of desire in the play is linguistic and not visual. This often occurs in theatre, which is forced to deal with limitations that do not hinder cinematic representations, and which must rely on language to emphasize elements that in cinema could be signaled through cinematography. This does not mean that the gaze does not play a part in the male conception of the female, but rather that in theatre, the gaze necessarily expresses itself through dialogue rather than through a camera lens. Towards the end of the play, Ángela confronts her potential suitors and promptly attempts to disillusion them about their chance of winning her affection, since she is now able to marry Carlos. Alejandro enters first and balks as he witnesses Ángela and Carlos declare their intention to marry. He proceeds to shock the bride-to-be by accusing her of leading him on. Carlos overhears this accusation and immediately calls off the wedding without giving her a chance to explain. When he finally returns and listens to her side of the story, he admits «ya creo / las verdades que deseo» (2639-40). What is important is not

whether Ángela truly meant to seduce Alejandro or not, but Carlos's declaration that he believes the truths he desires to believe. It seems that, for him, perception is indeed reality. A similar situation occurs when Marcelo supposes he is about to marry a beautiful young girl instead of her old and assumedly deaf mother. When the young Ángela is presented to Marcelo as his future bride, he declares «más apacible beldad / jamás en mis años vi» (2526-27). His voyeuristic scopophilia incites his desire to marry and possess her, and subsequently blinds him to the trap that Ángela and her mother so carefully and craftily lay out for him. Just like Carlos, he sees what he wants to see, and so, his scopophilic gaze obscures the reality and gravity of the situation.

The male gaze not only obscures truth, but also projects desire onto the other. Villanueva, for example, believes that «Mira de Amescua nos ofrece dramáticamente las virtudes que deben caracterizar a los caballeros y a las damas» (380). If this is true, then the male gaze used by Alejandro and the other *galanes* in *La casa del tabur* to objectify Isabela and Ángela is much more prescriptive than descriptive. It determines not what the women are, but rather what they should be. If a woman is called an angel, then she must act like one. There is no room for individuality nor human failings when divine nature is to be attained. She must be a «¡Mujer divina! El extremo / de hermosura manifiesta» (Mira de Amescua 285-86). The objectification of Isabela and Ángela in this *comedia* is not an overt attack on women, but simply a reflection of the sensibilities of the time period. Shakespeare, conversely, provides us with an example of blatantly misogynist drama in his *The Taming of the Shrew*. As Freedman points out in her chapter on Kate, «the rebellious female» (134), it is important to recognize the danger of rendering «woman into an apologist for the phallogocentric system that oppresses her» (134), as happens in Shakespeare's drama.

One way of making woman an apologist for the patriarchy is by portraying her as a perfect, selfless, loving wife, an example of flawless femininity meant to be held as a standard to all other women. Fray Luís de León's (in)famous treatise on married women invokes this very image of flawless femininity, and although he dedicated his text to married women, he often speaks of women in general. One of his precursors was Erasmus of Rotterdam's *Uxor mempsigamos*, another prescriptive text meant to teach women how they must behave when they become wives. Here the author insists that one of the duties of the married woman is to endure any and all of her husband's «estados anímicos» without complaint. Rather than chiding him for his importune behavior, Erasmus indicates that it is «más conveniente que la esposa sufra las injurias del consorte y realice ciertos 'servicios' dirigidos a ganarle la voluntad» (Rivera 48-49). Strictly speaking, she should not only suffer his abuse in silence, but even attempt to appease him.

In the context of *La casa del tabur*, the influence of such misogynistic thinking is clear. Isabela is eventually able to reform her husband's wayward ways through her heroic display of long-suffering and patience. In the second act, she uncomplainingly endures her husband's gambling addiction, and even goes so far as to supply him with her jewelry, which he uses to place bets. When their financial situation becomes dire, she finds herself forced to try to curb his activity. When Isabel hears Alejandro praise Cupid's favors, which allow him to pursue his extramarital interests, she naively believes that he is instead lamenting their disastrous economic state. In her pleas to him, she is self-effacing and humble, and indicates that she consistently puts his happiness and well-being before her own. Even when he calls her by another woman's name, she shows no signs of anger, and instead seeks only her husband's love. She even meets his unfair demands on her with tolerance and serenity. Isabela follows Erasmus and Fray Luis's advice to the letter, and she is therefore ultimately able to win over her wayward spouse.

Isabela's marriage to Alejandro was not contracted out of love, or even out of economic considerations, but instead was arranged by her father-in-law «con el propósito de curar la concupiscencia» (Rivera 23). «Concupiscencia,» defined as «deseo excesivo de los bienes materiales, especialmente de los goces sensuales» (García-Pelayo y Gross 115), perfectly describes Alejandro's pre- and post-marital behavior. As a frustrated Marcelo points out to his son, «jugabas lo que tenías, / y no tenías también, / y tierno quisiste bien / cuantas mujeres veías» (13-16). Alejandro's reckless behavior knows no bounds. Since Marcelo's previous attempts to cure his son of these vices failed, he encourages him to marry as a last resort, believing that «el error del joven pasa / con nuevas obligaciones» (63-64). Isabela apparently is just the woman for the job, since she embodies «la virtud y la hermosura» (33-36). As Alejandro's friend Luis declares in reference to the bride-to-be, she is «no mujer, no cosa humana... / Ángel es, que no mujer» (107-08). She will be the perfect wife and the cure for all the ills of her husband. Isabela is the flesh and blood saint who will forgive Alejandro's missteps and redeem him from his misguided ways. By elevating her as a saintly figure, these men strip her of her humanity.

Besides being objectified in this way, the female characters are also often compared to material goods. This is especially true when the male characters find themselves in the company of other men. Roque, for example, in his speech to Alejandro, explains his theory that women are like wine. They can make the sanest men lose their minds, and they can provoke men to laugh or to cry, or make them feel strong and brave. Roque goes on to say that just like the beginning stages of drinking wine, new brides make everyone in the house happy, but after a while it goes to your head. According to the *gracioso*, the only

difference between the two is that old wine is highly prized, but an old woman «leña es, seca, ¡vaya al fuego!» (268). Roque makes it clear that once a woman is past her prime, she automatically loses all value. He extends his wine metaphor to include the «jarro» used to house wine, as these two objects are metonymically linked. In this comparison, the «jarro,» and therefore the woman, must be «limpio ... sano y nuevo» (273). The ideal woman, then, must meet specific requirements laid out for her by men, and set in the company of other men, who are not held to the same standards.

Isabela and Ángela are also directly or indirectly equated with certain precious items of jewelry, as well, such as diamonds, a gold chain, an expensive dress or even a bag of gold. In fact, each of Ángela's suitors gives her one of these objects in the hopes of winning her affection. Luís is the first to do so, and offers her a diamond, «la piedra que, excedida en hermosura, / ufana está en su mano» (592-93). Alejandro, not to be outdone, presents her with «cincuenta escudos / dichosos más que el dueño que tenían» (605-06). Carlos, the only gambler for whom Ángela expresses true affection, is notably without any worldly possessions to offer. Not surprisingly, his beloved's mother summarily rejects him, and insists that her daughter should love «la riqueza / de un esposo verdadero» (648-49). His bid for the prize is rejected because he has nothing to offer.

Shortly thereafter, Luís wins a golden chain, which he promptly presents to Ángela. Diego is the next winner of the game and immediately offers his prize to Ángela, as well, which he justifies with the rationale, «si el diezmo a la iglesia dan, / recibe estos diez doblones» (816-17). Then, under quite a lot of pressure and a little bit of reverse psychology from both Ángela and her mother, he offers the most precious of all the winnings: a diamond necklace whose «diamantes son felices» (879) at the prospect of a change of ownership. This whole scene is reminiscent of rich offerings laid at the feet of an aloof and untouchable idol in the hopes of winning her favor. Perhaps Luis says it best when he equates winning in the game with winning in love. He says «en ella misma gané / oro y amor, piedra y fe» (779-80). These men clearly do not see Ángela as a potential companion, but rather as a valuable prize to be won. This competition is reminiscent of the raffle in which the suitors participate at the beginning of the scene. The message is clear: if you don't have anything to put in the pot, you cannot play the game, and therefore cannot win the prize. Money begets money, and the suitors assume that riches will secure Ángela's affection.

The idea of equating a woman with a precious gem or valuable item was not a novel concept in the seventeenth century. In fact, when Fray Luis wrote *La perfecta casada* in the sixteenth century, he based his description of righteous women on a biblical text. This passage, based on the one found in Proverbs 31:10, speaks of

the worth of a virtuous woman. It reads, «Muger de valor, ¿quien la hallara? raro y estremado es su precio» (13). The author then goes on to gloss the scripture, explaining, «De manera que el hombre que acertare con una mujer de valor, se puede desde luego tener por rico y dichoso, entendiendo que ha hallado una perla oriental, o un diamante finissimo, o una esmeralda, o otra alguna piedra preciosa de inestimable valor» (14). Perhaps the most striking feature of this conceptualization of women is that the author refrains from employing simile in his comparison. In fact, Georgina Dopico Black asserts that «the potential transgressiveness of *La perfecta casada*'s reading of Proverbs 31 lies, primarily, in its privileging of literal over figural meaning» (65). If this postulation is true, then a virtuous woman is not *like* an oriental pearl, a very fine diamond, an emerald, or another type of precious stone; she *is* all those things and is therefore no more human than any of them. Fray Luis continues this sentiment later on in the text when he writes that «una buena muger no es una muger, sino un monton de riquezas, y quien la posee es rico con ella sola, y sola ella le puede hazer bienaventurado y dichoso (17; my emphasis). The emphasis on the possession and objectification of women is overwhelming, and the author makes it quite clear that the woman who can attain this (impossible) feminine ideal is closer to an emerald or a diamond than to a human being. In fact, if she does achieve such perfection, as he argues she should, she will lose her humanity altogether and cease to be a woman.

Beyond metaphorically portraying women as material goods, Mira de Amescua also equates the female characters in this *comedia* to animals. This association finds support in Fray Luis's treatise on marriage. He suggests that the foundations of a household are an ox and a woman, the first to plough and the second to guard and keep the house (23). One is clearly as important as the other, and can therefore be conceived of as comparable to one another. In *La casa del tabur*, the comparisons of women with animals can sometimes be positive, but are almost always negative. When Alejandro first encounters Ángela, he praises her by declaring her to be «una airada fiera» (551) with the ability to affect his reason. Marcelo later counters his son's desire in the second act to beg forgiveness from his long-suffering wife by explaining that a woman «es animal muy malo» (2172), from which one should never beg anything. Although Alejandro utters his phrase as praise, it has the same effect as Marcelo's disparaging utterance.

When Ángela rejects Alejandro's advances, she becomes an «áspid» (2278), a «basilisco» (2282), and a «víbora malina» (2303), while to Diego she is a «sierpe libia» (2648). These comparisons between the woman and snakes are clear allusions to the ancient biblical story of Adam and Eve. Because Eve was the one who succumbed to the temptations of the serpent, and therefore brought about the expulsion of man from the Garden of Eden, she has always been portrayed in the Catholic tradition as the exact moral opposite of the Virgin Mary, and even as a cohort of the

devil himself. This «Ave/Eva» dichotomy goes hand in hand with that of the «buena/mala mujer,» and clearly indicates that the male characters believe that Ángela has fallen from her former state of grace. Besides being compared to different reptiles, Carlos, Alejandro, and Marcelo all call her «sirena» at different points in the third act, thereby portraying her as a monstrous, dangerous, and attractive cross between woman and beast. Whether negative or positive, all comparisons with animals, wild, tame, or hybrid, can serve to dehumanize and insult women.

Another tactic that men sometimes use to objectify a woman consists of fragmenting her in order to visually consume her piecemeal, rather than have to encounter her as a whole being. This is obviously much more easily represented in the cinema than in the theatre, due to the camera's ability to channel the male gaze by showing only one part of an actress at a time. In the theatrical tradition, and especially in the *comedia*, dialogue is often more important than visual spectacle, due to the unique nature of theatrical production. Therefore, the female characters are linguistically, and not visually, drawn and quartered. When Carlos praises Ángela as the «objeto deseado» (2229) it is because of her singular face, her hair that rivals the rays of the sun, her teeth like pearls, and her lips like rubies. The male characters also use fragmentation to illustrate the danger and violence that is supposedly inherent in female nature. Diego, for his part, accuses Ángela of shooting arrows from her «hermosos ojos» (2628) and of hiding venom between her carnation lips (2650). Along similar lines, when Alejandro finally decides to repent of his malfeasance, he declares that Isabela's lips have the power to grant him life or death, but indicates that she must either speak truth or have her throat cut. While she may hold sway over his life in a figurative sense, he clearly wields power over her physical existence. Even when threatening murder, Alejandro cannot deal with Isabela as a whole entity, but rather reduces her to lips and a throat.

The male gaze does not only affect men's perception of women in the play, but also influences women's perception of themselves and of other women. Ángela, for one, is self-consciously aware that the male gaze objectifies Isabela as an angel, and she clearly feels the pressure of being compared to such an impossible standard. She accuses her fickle suitor, Carlos, of pursuing the beautiful Isabela, and has no qualms about accusing him of infidelity while attacking her perceived rival by sarcastically referring to her as a «mujer de los cielos» (931). Unfortunately, Ángela's hopelessness with respect to competing with Isabela's supposed perfection, underscored by the male characters' prescriptive objectification of her as angelic, seems to destroy any hope of solidarity between the two women. Ángela's mother, as well, plays into the objectification of women, using her own daughter as bait in order to trap a wealthy husband who is rich enough to support the whole family. Later she uses Ángela once again as bait, this time

to trap an unwilling partner, Marcelo, for herself. Ángela's mother parades her daughter around and encourages her to flirt with everyone, even though she only ever expresses romantic interest in Carlos.

There is a certain degree of inversion in one of the mother's speeches to Ángela in the first act. She compares her daughter to a diligent fisherwoman who, with a little luck, can aspire to a great marriage using «la red lisonjera» (376). Thus, she places power in the hands of her daughter, and makes the men into unwitting victims. Later in the same speech, she describes the men as «zánganos» (430) that circle the attractive honey that is her daughter's beauty. Here the men are the animals, helpless to fight against greater forces at work. Immediately afterwards, Ángela makes a point of comparing herself to both animals and objects only in order to differentiate herself from them in no uncertain terms. Her mother advises her never to love in order to retain her freedom, and in response, Ángela decries this idea by insisting that even animals and inanimate objects are capable of love. The dove, the lovebird, and the nightingale are governed by love, just as the ivy loves the ash tree, the elm tree loves the vine, and the palm trees love each other (481-500). She only makes these comparisons because she knows herself to be superior to and different from all of these. She is not a lovesick nightingale or a lonely vine. Rather, she is a human being capable of profound feelings who should, and does, love deeply.

Isabela, on the other hand, succumbs to the objectification and identifies herself as a «tortola amante» (1271) and an «avecilla inocente» (1275) that Alejandro has entangled in a net and trapped in an eternal prison. By objectifying herself in this manner, she relegates herself to a powerless position in which tears are her only form of protest. She also makes no effort to correct her husband's wicked ways, and instead, consoles him when he feels ashamed of his selfish and self-serving actions. For example, towards the end of Act 1, Alejandro returns home in shame from the gambler's house, declaring, «Vengo sin joyas» (1020), to which Isabela responds, «Señor, / no es caso tan riguroso / que en ánimo generoso / deba engendrar tal dolor. / Joyas tengo de valor» (1021-24). In other words, despite his financially devastating behavior, she immediately forgives and even encourages her wayward husband. The playwright, then, offers the female characters in this *comedia* a choice. Although the male gaze consistently strives to objectify them, they are under no obligation to accept the dehumanization, nor to promote the tendency in their dealings with other women. This ability to exercise their agency forms an indispensable part of the feminism that Bella, Villanueva, and A. Williamsen note in Mira de Amescua's works.

Another feminist element in *La casa del tabur* is the presence of a strong mother character. The glaring lack of the mother figure in the overwhelming majority of

comedias leaves critics to fill in the narrative gaps. Although the characters often make mention of a mother, she is almost always deceased before the beginning of the play, as in Guillén de Castro's *El Narciso en su opinión*, or absent throughout, as in Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *La vida es sueño*, to cite but two examples. Scholarship on the mother figure in the *comedia* is exceedingly sparse, perfectly reflecting the systematic omission of this particular character. Nevertheless, a few recent studies have attempted to fill the void by focusing on mothers who are mentioned, but never present. For example, Ruth Anthony's article about *La vida es sueño* focuses specifically on Violante, the absent mother of Rosaura. Anthony explores this character through textual clues found in speeches by Rosaura and Clotaldo, her former lover and Rosaura's father. By piecing together this sparse evidence, the critic is able to paint a surprising portrait of the mother *in absentia*, as well as link her to the text in significant ways.

If an absent mother can be textually present in Calderón's work, then the mere presence and participation of the elder Ángela in *La casa del tabur* clearly functions as a significant and essential element of this play. Mira de Amescua's text not only includes a mother figure, but also features her prominently in an especially metatheatrical role. She continually drives the action as she acts as both playwright and actor, and only Marcelo rivals her in metatheatricity. She comically utilizes her sham deafness to eavesdrop, give advice, and manipulate. In point of fact, she eventually exercises more power than Alejandro's father, who, for all intents and purposes, should wield the most control, due to his wealth and status. He occupies a position at the top of the socio-economic hierarchy, which he uses to withhold, give, promise, and take away, all in an effort to rein in his son's wild and improper impulses. The elder Ángela, in contrast, works from within. Her methods are subtle, cunning, and crafty, whereas Marcelo's include obvious, overstated, and public manipulation of both the plot and other characters.

Despite Ángela's rejection of the effects of the male gaze and her mother's role as metaplaywright, the author does successfully exercise his control over her and other female characters as he prevents the formation of bonds of female solidarity between them. Solidarity, a common feminist element that allows women to collectively resist the influence of the patriarchy, often presents itself in texts written by early modern women writers. Its absence in Mira de Amescua's text unfortunately undermines, in a certain sense, the feminism cultivated by both Ángela and her mother. The patriarchal structure literally and figuratively separates Ángela from Isabela. Since the Spanish honor code required the enclosure of women, especially unmarried women, both women are confined to their homes, ensuring that they never actually meet one another. Also, Marcelo's irresponsible actions position Ángela not only as Isabela's rival, but as a threat to her family

and happiness. The actions of the other gamblers also isolate Ángela as the men use her as a mechanism of homosociality. In other words, she functions as a locus for their competition and interaction with each other.

In spite of the many feminist elements of the text, the objectifying male gaze does have a profound effect on the characters and the characterization of Isabela and Ángela. It projects male expectations onto them, and expects them to fully accept this imposition as if they were a blank canvas on which to inscribe male desire. This gaze is prescriptive rather than descriptive, and allows the male characters to deal with the 'other' by reflecting an inverted image, like Lacan's mirror, with which the men must come to terms. They identify with the image while simultaneously recognizing its differences. In this sense, the object feeds off the Freudian anxiety of possible castration, making it difficult for these men to encounter the woman as a whole, flawed being. Their reaction to her failure to enact the ideal of the 'buena mujer' often causes them to denounce, dehumanize, and divide her, as Marcelo, Alejandro, Roque, Diego, Luis, and Carlos are wont to do to Isabela and Ángela. Their male gaze is voyeuristic and self-serving, and although the female characters cannot avoid being looked upon, they can decide whether or not to accept and internalize this gaze. Thus, misogynist and feminist traits exist side by side in Mira de Amescua's play, which, I maintain, is more complex and deserving of study than many scholars previously assumed. Hopefully, this study of the male gaze in *La casa del tabur* will, to some degree, rescue it from neglect and open it up to new studies and dialogue.

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